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Spring 2017

EDU 402

**Background Statement**

I attended Windham/Raymond schools for K through 12. In my view the most prominent expectations for the students of RSU 14 were to graduate and go on to college. Although we had a relatively strong vocational program, 86% of my graduating class went on to pursue higher education. While this is impressive in a lot of ways I felt like Windham should have put more effort into encouraging students to explore *all* options for post-graduation. There was so much focus on the importance of going to college and so little on the other completely valid career paths students have available to them. Wouldn’t we all be so much better off if we left high school with an idea of what we wanted from life and a path to get us there rather than the path but not the purpose? Maybe there was a focus on this for other students but as an AP and honors student the destination of our education was college. In my experience, and the experience of many of my peers, our parents’ expectations aligned well with the school’s. Again, this may have varied for students in other tracks. Windham has a large business community; many of whom were active sponsors of our schools. The school system in Windham was held in high regard throughout the community and education was certainly seen as a priority.

As for my expectations, every career path I considered as a young adult, apart from becoming a ski bum, would have required me to attend at least a four-year college. I felt that Windham had a wide range of academic opportunities that I was able to take advantage of. At the time, I didn’t think much about the alternatives to our very traditional school environment. Classes were almost always set up with rows of students ready to be lectured. Some classes were arranged for group work but that was reserved mostly for social studies classes. What stands out to me as the most oft utilized teaching strategy was direct instruction. There were, of course, science labs, group projects and, cooperative learning activities scattered throughout the curriculum but they were not the dominant teaching strategy. Although these methods were usually dry it did not prevent me from learning like I’m sure it did some. This style was hardest for me in English and Social Studies classes, perhaps because these were already the subjects that I liked least. While I was successful, I witnessed many of my peers struggling with the abstract materials being presented in such a flat manner. The learning environment that worked best for me was one where we were encouraged to talk amongst ourselves, ask questions, and solve problems. Classes and teachers that valued silence were hard for me as someone who likes to talk through ideas and participate. The most memorable teacher I’ve had was my Chemistry teacher who I had for both Chemistry I and Chemistry II. Mrs. McLellan did do some lecturing but she also incorporated mini activities and real life representations of the molecular concepts we were discussing. My favorite part of those classes were the problem sessions. Mrs. McLellan had 20+ 3’x3’ whiteboards that each student could use to solve homework problems or other examples in class. She would give us time to try to solve problems independently or with peers. She would take questions throughout, giving us hints and leading us to the right answer. This allows you to write a problem out and really focus on just that question. Then as we made mistakes or went down the wrong route we could easily erase and start fresh – something that gets difficult on paper. It innately encourages peer to peer instruction and mistakes never felt like a big deal as they were so easy to fix. Another thing that I have always appreciated about Mrs. McLellan’s teaching strategy was her grading policy. She allowed you to choose from 3 or 4 different grading options. Although everyone did the same work you could choose whether you wanted more weight put into your tests or your portfolio, for instance. Those who were bad test takers might choose to put more work into their notes for more credit. You could also choose a different grading option for the new semester if your first choice wasn’t working. I think this is a great way to grade students because we all did essentially the same work but those who weren’t the best test takers could demonstrate their knowledge through Cornell Notes and worked problems and vice versa. I was such an active learner in this class because I was so enabled to be that way. There was variety and choice on an almost daily basis. Mrs. McLellan gave us all ownership over our learning and believed that we could all learn the material through a variety of teaching mechanisms.

Windham/Raymond is a large school district with just shy of 1,000 students in the high school. While the district is not very ethnically or racially diverse it does represent a very diverse socio-economic structure. RSU 14 reports that 37% of the district qualifies for free or reduced lunch. The district also serves a wide range of academic needs. Four categories organize courses, standard (for those working below grade level), academic (for those working at or near grade level, college prep), honors (for those working and reading above grade level), and advanced placement courses. I started high school taking honors classes mainly because I pushed to do so, knowing from my brother’s experience that I could do it. There was a notion that taking multiple honors courses would be extraordinarily difficult and it was not recommended. I think this did a disservice to other students who may not have known to advocate for themselves or had parents to do it for them. All my high school courses were either honors or AP so I can’t speak to the ease of upward mobility once you were in a certain track but I imagine it was difficult due to gaps in content between course categories. Classes were full year on a block schedule which could make it difficult to take certain classes. For instance, it was impossible for me to take calculus in high school because I wasn’t in gifted and talented math as a middle schooler. This wasn’t something that greatly hindered me in life certainly but it was frustrating that some middle school evaluation made it impossible for me to reach a certain level in high school. Overall the quality of my education was high. As an honors student, I had access to a large variety of classes and many of the ‘better’ teachers. I was well prepared for the SAT, SAT subject tests, and college in general. My school experience has already influenced me as a person and it will continue to influence me as a professional. Because I was such a successful student it’s even more important for me to be aware of the struggles that many students face in school. Just because traditional teaching strategies worked for me does not mean they will work for my students. I recognize that students will need me to meet them where they’re at and be an advocate for them when they cannot be one for themselves.

After beginning my college career as a political and environmental science major at Simmons College I began to realize that teaching was a career path that called to me far more. Becoming a PATH Intl. certified therapeutic riding instructor helped me realize that teaching and working with kids was something I had a passion for. This paired with my personal experience as a student, knowing that teachers, especially math teachers, had the ability to make or break a subject for me inspired me to change my field of study and transfer to UMF. Becoming a teacher was never on my radar until I was a college student realizing the profound influence that teachers have had on me and my potential to do the same. I believe that education is the most important and effective tool we have as individuals and as a collective people and I hope I can help young people become better learners and community members will purpose.

Great teachers know their students on a personal basis and teach to the individual needs of students while also promoting independence and growth. They know how to teach to different learning styles but also encourage students to become better learners in every setting. Strong educators provide choice and variety in their classroom but keep an emphasis on rigor and proficiency. I hope that I can create a classroom and lessons that enable students to learn and meet standards while keeping work meaningful and interesting to each student. What excites me most about being a teacher is the constant growth it requires. I know that as a teacher I will never stop learning and hopefully improving. The idea of having a job that uses the same skills repeatedly without change scares me. I know that as a teacher things will never stop changing and I will always have a new challenge. As a problem solver, this excites me.

I hope I can bring a fresh perspective to education and break the mold of traditional teaching styles. I look forward to being able to work with fellow teachers and leaders in my future school to bring more meaning to content and enhance teaching strategies and curriculum using what we know about different learning styles. As a new teacher, I hope I can bring a fresh perspective to classrooms that often haven’t changed in years while also learning from veterans in the field. Experience can’t be faked and I know that I will struggle to find what works for my students and myself. When looking for jobs I will look for schools that have supportive staff and administration who will help me through the beginning of my career and be open to new ideas and practices.

My biggest fear as a future educator is the burnout that so many new teachers face. I worry that I will not be able to balance the many responsibilities teachers have with my own personal health and well-being. My students will have diverse and complex problems and I can’t possibly fix them all, something that already gives me anxiety. Another concern that I have is that, despite all I have learned in school, I won’t be able to implement creative and fresh instruction into my classroom. It’s hard not to worry that all the ideal situations and lesson plans we have simulated will fall flat in my classroom and I will resort to the same old strategies that isolate so many students.